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## ABSTRACT

A series of 11 propositions about the role of language in learning emerged from the data collected and analyzed in a semester-long collaborative seminar in language arts methods for inservice and preservice teachers. A discussion of each proposition reflects the data that support it. The focus was on teaching as inquiry or research for the practitioner. The study explored and described the context and negotiated curriculum of a language arts methods class in elementary education, tracing the theoretical development of the thinking of preservice teachers in regard to the teaching and learning of the language arts. Findings suggest that language gives individuals a voice, helps them to define themselves in a group, to overcome silence, to articulate beliefs, and to become empowered. Findings also suggest that language becomes a tool for reflexivity and that the differences which are made apparent by distinguishing between common ground and uniqueness lead to questions which propel thinking into the future. (Appendixes provide the course syllabus and a calendar of major seminar events.) (RS)

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THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN  
COLLABORATIVE LEARNING CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT: THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN COLLABORATIVE LEARNING  
CONTEXTS

From the qualitative data collected and analyzed in a semester long project in language arts methods (whole language orientation) involving seven inservice teachers, eight preservice teachers, a university instructor, and a school principal, a series of tenets or propositions about the role of language in learning emerged. These categories are grouped under four major headings: language as a tool for developing voice, creating environments, pursuing inquiry and for engaging in reflexivity. There is discussion of each tenet in light of the data which supports it. Attached are the course syllabus and calendar which provided the learning context for the project which generated the data and tenets.

Language is a social act born of the need to communicate with those around us. As we contemplate the role of language in learning, more specifically in the learning contexts which comprise formal schooling, it becomes obvious that no facet of our lives in schools escapes the formalizing, reifying lens of language. From the data collected and analyzed in a semester long project<sup>1</sup>, a series of tenets or propositions about the role of language in learning emerged (Watson, Harste & Burke, in press, have similar categories for the role of inquiry in learning contexts). These categories are grouped under four major headings: language as a tool for developing voice, creating environments, pursuing inquiry and for engaging in reflexivity. A brief discussion of each tenet in light of the data which supports it will be followed by implications of these tenets for teaching as inquiry and teacher education.

1. Language allows us to develop voice and define ourselves within the group.
2. Language allows us to overcome silence and enter the dialogue.
3. Language allows us to maintain voice through nurturance and critique.
4. Language allows us to articulate our beliefs and to become empowered.

5. Language allows us to create our learning environments by establishing common ground.
6. Language allows us to create our learning environments by highlighting uniqueness.
7. The inquiry which language allows helps us to set ourselves in motion.
8. The inquiry which language allows helps us to propel ourselves into the future.
9. The reflexivity which language allows helps us to gain historical perspective.
10. The reflexivity which language allows helps us to make connections, to be publicly metacognitive.
11. The reflexivity which language allows helps us to frame and reframe our experiences, thereby becoming instruments for our own and other's learning.

#### **Voice: Defining Ourselves in the Group**

The concept of voice was a literary one in its inception. It referred to a sense of power, elegance, tone and uniqueness present in a piece of literature. The writer's voice is heard when the piece "works" or rings true. The concept of voice has of late taken on political overtones as in the writing of Belenky, et al. (1987) concerning "women's ways of knowing." To

be politically, socially, or economically disenfranchised is to have no voice. In learning contexts, the term has come to mean the development of reasoned beliefs and the willingness and power to express them (Watson, Harste & Burke, in press).

### Overcoming Silence: Entering the Dialogue

A great deal of the silence encountered in students [or teachers] is related to instructional history. Most of us have been educated in systems which have given us little voice in the form or substance of our educational experiences. Education programs seem particularly suited to a transmission mode of teaching. As discussed in Chapter Two, education has moved toward technique and management. These "how-to's" of schooling seem to require little input from those learning the techniques. As Stefanie said,

Education is definitely the safest area I've ever been in--you don't have to expose yourself at all. You can go slow or just keep quiet in the background (interview 3/13/88).

And Rebecca said in seminar five,

. . . we have been structured all the way through high school and college and all of a sudden we come into a couple of classes where this is taught and some people are really upset . . . (transcript, seminar five, 10/9/87).

Some group members found that the seminar demanded an end to silence and a beginning of dialogue about beliefs. Stefanie said in an interview,

I was really intimidated at first. I didn't want to talk because I didn't know how I felt or what I believed. The seminar brought out so much more of what

was expected of you, especially me. It made me go home and think about so many things I would have normally closed my eyes to (interview, 3/13/87).

Learning to speak and to articulate our beliefs breaks the silence and begins to move us toward being theory makers. Articulation forces the thoughtful reasoning of a position and allows other to reflect on and respond to that position. Knowledge is created as silence is broken.

Instructors are often the central talkers, doers, and thinkers in university educational settings. Because they come to those settings with lots of content information, strategies, techniques and goals, their voices are often pre-eminent. In collaborative settings, the challenge is find ways to allow all voices to be heard. Again, because of instructional histories, there is often reluctance to voicing opinions on the part of students.

We talked about things you wanted talk about and then you kind of laid it in our laps and said, "What are the things you need to learn? We'll learn about them?" And different people took responsibility for those things. It was neat. At first, I almost couldn't think because I had never been given that opportunity. It was a totally different feeling, like no matter what we said, it had some worth. I don't think you get that opportunity, that freedom to say what you really think without feeling like someone next to you is going to cringe over what you just said (Kim, interview, 3/1/88).

When a low risk environment is evolving and group members are beginning to share, that public pooling of information helps each member to develop a voice. Contributing to the group's

information becomes natural and the next challenge becomes how to nurture those developing voices.

### Maintaining Voice: Nurturing and Critiquing

How is it possible in a collaborative setting to call into question people's beliefs and actions, to argue a position contrary to a colleague's and at the same time to nurture and develop voice? In my experience in this project, the public debate of issues seemed to encourage others to ask questions and to join in the dialogue. Tim reflected on one such debate session,

Things changed that week. We got to be more of one integrated group, less of two groups. The conflict between Trish and Terry made the teachers and students closer. It opened us up as being less sure of ourselves, people who were still looking for something (interview, 2/24/87).

And Joy said,

I felt better after seminar five. I felt that you could say whatever you wanted (4/1/88).

The preservice teachers gained confidence in voicing their questions and opinions from the demonstration of public debate over issues. The attitudes of instructors and other more experienced "voicers" also needed to be nurturing. Stefanie said in an interview after the seminar project ended,

You never treated our responses like they were less or our questions like we didn't know anything. You realized that and you had the attitude that we did know or at least that we were clued in. And I think that was really important (interview 3/13/88).

The preservice teachers learned many lessons about critique and nurturance. Joy grappled with how to balance the two in her field experience following the seminar. She said,

I know if I hadn't done what I did last semester [in the seminar], I wouldn't even be thinking these thoughts. That whole night after the first day in my new field experience, I just kept thinking, "How can I introduce her to certain things and show her that they can work?" And then I kept saying, "Joy, you're a crazy woman, what are you doing? Just do your assignments and graduate and then you can do whatever you want! But no," I thought, "If I can't deal with this lady now, what I am going to do with colleagues who think differently (data analysis session, 2/13/87).

She felt strongly that the teacher with whom she was paired needed to be doing more reading and writing with her students. Her critique of the classroom led to her want to share ideas she had learned in the previous semester. However, she tempered her own strong voice and proceeded in a sensitive way, offering ideas and articles in a thoughtful way, trying to create a dialogue which might spark some questioning in that teacher. The teacher reported to a colleague later that year, that during her experience with Joy she got her first curriculum idea from a preservice teacher and that she had used it successfully. Joy had learned to balance critique and nurturance and in so doing had found a new sense of her own empowerment.

### Articulating our Beliefs: Developing Empowered

#### Teachers

One of the most valuable curricular events of the seminar was the presentation of the curriculum models on overheads.

These presentations made the teachers think critically about how they structured their days and what drove their curricula. Their articulations of their beliefs and the preservice teachers' questions and responses revealed quite a diversity of philosophies. The willingness to share their thinking made the teachers seem "like real people, too" as one preservice teacher put it. The teachers soon came down off the pedestals and more collegial relationships formed with the preservice teachers. Joy said of this phenomena in a post course interview,

It's interesting how the interaction with the teachers changed over time. They became just people with input, not [people] to tell me what to think. I took it kind of one step at a time, but I realized they were just other people who were interested in what I'm interested in. Yes, they are further along, but I'll get there (interview, 2/12/88).

There was a wonderful leveling of power, though not of uniqueness. That powerful feeling of "I'll get there" came in large measure from the "input" or articulation of beliefs by group members. It is some tribute to the sense of freedom and forum for individual voice present in the seminar that at least one preservice teacher could say,

Unlike all the work I was doing for other college professors, the things we did in seminar were for me (memo, 12/4/87).

The development of voice helps us to break the silence, articulate our beliefs and become empowered. Additionally, it allows us to create environments for learning.

**Communing: Language as a Tool for Creating**

### Environments

In our daily lives we move in and out of numerous contexts--home and family, business and colleagues, leisure and friends, the unfamiliar environment and strangers. In each of these settings, we use language to establish who and what we are in relation to others around us. The construction of ongoing dialogue in any setting depends upon many factors. The analysis of data related to language use in establishing the environment in our setting yielded two major tenets: collaborative groups work toward establishing common ground and collaborative groups naturally highlight uniqueness.

#### Creating Environments: Establishing Common Ground

In traditional college classroom settings it has been rare for a sense of community to develop among the students themselves or among students and instructors. The lecture format and large class size has limited the interaction between members of the group. In our setting, the initial invitations for dialogue and sharing served to establish community and help us to find common ground. Tim, in a data analysis session after the seminar had ended, said,

I think the first seminar session was important in making it our classroom. We all talked, chatted, listened and broke away from the lecture format. This was important because from the beginning we undergrads could tell it wasn't going to be an ordinary class (analysis session, 2/24/88).

That initial communication between all group members helped to establish a sense of community and equality. As Gina said,

when I asked the group to reflect on that first session of the semester,

The first thing that comes to mind is the communication between the preservice and inservice teachers. We preservice teachers were regarded as equals by the inservice teachers (journal entry, 9/11/87).

In order to initiate and sustain conversations, a search for common ground must occur. Even those group members who struggled with this, highlighted for us the importance of overcoming typical age, experience and position boundaries. Steranie said,

I still [at midsemester] feel a big barrier, a line that I can't cross. I have felt that with every field experience teacher I've ever had. It's a little less with Trish. It's personal. I don't want to overstep my bounds. Trish is really open and I think that we would have a lot in common and we could have really good conversations if I didn't have this boundary (interview, 10/29/87).

As common ground is found and conversations begin, we become "insiders" in a community of learners. We share common language and similar goals. We get to know each other. Eric said,

That whole seminar experience was so much better than regular field experiences for getting to know your students. The two students I have now [semester after the seminar] seem nice enough, but they just come in and do their little thing and then I don't see them again. With Joy [during the seminar experience] I knew that whatever we did we would talk about and work on together. It gave us more ownership. I felt that Joy and I owned the class. Before, the IU students were always outsiders. I never felt that with Joy (interview, 3/13/88).

Insiders share common group language and events. Concerns are sometimes raised that this insidership produces clones or blandness of thought, but we found that the search for common ground included a highlighting of uniqueness.

### Highlighting Uniqueness in a Social Setting

Conventional wisdom would say that collaborative settings in which people share and work closely together would tend to reduce uniqueness and reduce thought to some common denominator. However, that seemed not to be the case in our setting and I suspect it is not the case in other truly collaborative settings. For example, after our first seminar experience in which each member's personal biography and "nightmares" were shared, at least one member voiced her feeling of being "part of an immense learning experience" (Stefanie, journal entry, 9/18/87). The highlighting of uniqueness through personal biographies and unique concerns and fears contributed to a sense of unity, not separateness.

Joy's comments below, related to being "individualistic" caused me to think more critically about the notions of the individual in society. Do we lose our identities as we become more social learners or is our true individuality enhanced? She wrote,

I've always been more of an individualistic person. When you put me in groups I don't do as well as when I'm on my own. I think that is something that the authoring cycle is good for. I find it helping a lot of things that are weaknesses in me and I think that's why I'm liking it so much. . . . School teaches you to look out for yourself and stomp right on top of other people . . . (interview, 10/24/87).

Joy was a product of our education system, which is highly competitive rather than cooperative. Prior to this experience she had not been exposed to curriculum based on social learning

theory. As she began to see the benefits of sharing reading and writing, her own expression of herself--her personal unique experience--was enhanced. Ideas from others during the author's circles served to help Joy construct a letter to her grandmother and provided a very meaningful and personal "end product" of that curricular experience. The sharing which preceded the product did not threaten those who shared because the products were not in competition for "best story" nor were they graded. Through social processes the unique is highlighted.

As an individual's uniqueness is manifested it can become a springboard for other's expressions of their own particular natures. Trish's discussion of her beliefs in seminar five demonstrated this phenomenon. Tim later had this to say about the events of that day and how the social setting turned a corner in its provision for many voices to be heard.

Something sparked Trish. I think she hadn't been satisfied with what was being said so she decided to say something. That really got everyone thinking more and maybe differently. The class definitely has a different structure now. It's more discussion oriented (interview, 10/30/87).

There are undoubtedly strong mutual influences in collaborative settings. One might expect the stronger, perhaps more vociferous members, to dominate. Better the democratic interaction of the group than domination by the one "in charge"--the instructor. Instructors have a difficult roles in college courses in which they are attempting to establish collaboration. We are operating within learning settings that

are framed by two different learning theories simultaneously. On the one hand, we are required by universities to present some approximation of core curriculum for the subject area and to give grades for coursework--learning modes often based on external motivation. On the other hand, we may be advocating and trying to construct learning settings in which class members have some input into the curriculum, work toward the answering of their own questions, and become self-motivated learners to whom grades are less relevant.

Adding to the difficulty of the instructor's role, is the fact that education is a value oriented enterprise. Instructors do not enter learning settings devoid of agendas. We have strong values concerning the goals and directions of education and seek to share those beliefs with those in our classes. Fortunately, the sharing of space, time, thought and authority in collaborative settings becomes, in a sense, a checks and balances system in which individual autonomy is not lost but honored. Tim caught something of this notion in a conversation between us about my role in the seminar.

For a while we could tell that things weren't going real good--the way you wanted them to at first. At first, for you, it was more of "I'm the teacher;" whereas, later on you were still viewed as a teacher but you were also more of a student with us. I think we even viewed the teachers as being students also. I think the best thing in there was when people brought in their own ideas and you would walk in and say, "Well, this is what I had planned, but this sounds better, so we'll go with this. I don't think you gave up directing, you just became less structured. You broadened your goals to include what others felt they needed (interview, 2/24/88).

## Language as a Tool for Inquiry:

### Active Questioning

Another function of language in learning is inquiry. In fact, Watson, Burke, and Harste (in press) say that research is merely a formalized version of the learning process itself. Asking our own questions forces us to take ownership of and responsibility for our own learning. As I analyzed data and met with seminar members after the seminar ended, I began to see our initial sharing of "Nightmares in My Closet" as a sharing of "orienting questions." Though they were not stated as questions, the fact that they were "nightmares" gave them value as issues to be pursued and therefore as orienting questions. A number of these "nightmares" did, in fact, become guiding themes for inquiry for various seminar members.

### Orienting Questions: Setting Ourselves in Motion

All of our research projects stemmed from something we were curious about, something we had heard about in seminar that didn't quite go right in our minds. We wanted to see if it really worked. . . (interview, 2/18/88).

Gina Steele

The willingness to be an active learner requires the willingness to ask questions. Some seminar members were more willing than others to come to terms with their current questions and make them public.

One initially less willing member was Kim. Her publicly shared nightmare from the first session was "fear of not getting

the big picture in which to fit all this information I'm getting as an undergrad." Her written but unspoken nightmare was, "fear that I won't feel the freedom to ask other teachers about how they teach certain subjects or about their means of motivation." The notion of being an active questioner became a subtheme for Kim within the larger theme of theoretical development or "getting the big picture," as she called it. It was not until much later in data analysis that I made the connection between Kim's nightmares and her orienting questions.<sup>2</sup>

Kim was very quiet in seminar sessions and not particularly willing to ask questions of her inservice partner in the beginning. After the fifth seminar session (discussed in Chapter Four) more of the preservice teachers began to see the value of asking their own questions. In fact, as I reflected in a debriefing session following the fifth seminar,

It seems that because of contact with the teachers, they [the preservice teachers] are realizing that they have a tremendous amount to learn. Kim said to me at break [of fifth seminar session], "Where am I going to get all this if I don't get it in here?" I think it's frightening to them to see that the teachers, too, have questions, that they don't have all the answers. . . . In the [fifth] session they have been willing to open up and unload and now they are at another level of being willing to learn. . . . Kim, who has spoken very little in the seminar, came to my regular class. . . and said [to the guest speaker], "I can understand now what Sharon said the other day, that undergrads come in and just want to know what they're supposed to learn so they can spit it back on tests. That's the kind of learner I am. That's the way I have been trained to be (debriefing, 10/15/87).

As Kim became a questioner through the research project, she also became a theory developer and a different kind of learner

from the one she described in the paragraph above. "The project," she would later say, "forced me to ask questions." What did she need to learn about the children in the classroom? What environment and engagements could they provide for these young readers and writers? What were Linda's expectations for the project? How would it fit into Linda's existing curriculum? Her searching for answers to these and other questions helped her to forge a working theory of how young children read and write and to examine her own role in that process. In field experiences subsequent to the seminar experience, Kim became a much more active questioner. Six months after the seminar ended, Kim's new teacher/researcher mode became evident in a conversation about her student teaching experience.

It's not enough just to know "this is working." I need to know **why** (phone conversation, 9/3/88)

Not only are we as inquirer benefited by our inquiries, but also those of whom we inquire. Linda reflected on the power of inquiries to help her articulate her beliefs.

The more people ask why I am doing things, the better I get at talking about it. I have my field experience preservice teachers keep a notebook now. They have to bring questions for me each time they come (member checking session, 2/11/89).

Another initially reluctant questioner was Stephanie. Trish said of her,

She has asked a couple of questions, but I think she lacks the confidence to say whatever she wants to say. The other students seem comfortable talking and asking questions. Stefanie won't really even ask a probing question (conversation, 10/23/87).

Stefanie began to open up and question a little in seminar five. Perhaps having the support of others doing a lot of questioning prompted her to speak up. The following excerpt from her journal shows the new connections in her thinking and experience which she was then able to make.

Class today was an informative one. I understand much more about whole language. I had not even heard the term when I began this semester. I like the concept--especially after seeing it in action in Trish's class. From our discussion in the seminar, I began to see some of the ways her class learns when I reflected upon past observations.

Today in class [Trish's classroom] we discovered a boy who went from signing his name "t-t-t-t" to signing "S-t-e-v-e"! That was so exciting. Quite a few of thee kids made some incredible improvements in their writing.

One more thing--I'm happy to know that I can "sound out words" or tell the kids to, when they ask me how to spell a word. Before the seminar today, I was afraid to in my classroom (journal entry, 10/9/87).

The "what about phonics" question had turned out to be a major question for most of the preservice teachers prior to this session, but no one had raised the issue. My understanding of teachers as researchers still had a fairly narrow focus at that point. "Doing a classroom research project" was my idea of the realm of teacher research. I still believe that classroom research projects are very valuable and they were for us; however, I now believe that these projects are part of the broader sense of a teacher/researcher mind set in the classroom.

A few of the preservice teachers were active questioners from the beginning. Joy, in a midterm interview, was discussing

the various categories she had formulated for sorting seminar members. She said,

I put Gina and me together because we question things a lot, but it's not because we don't like them. It's so that we can learn more about them, believe in them stronger or not believe in them at all (interview, 10/24/87).

Joy demonstrated that function of inquiry which is to move us away from transmission mode learning. If we are pursuing our own questions, our learning is guided by those questions and our discoveries become generative avenues for new questions, not answers to someone else's evaluation of well we learned their information. In a post course interview, Joy reflected on her initial feelings about learning during the semester.

I remember my confusion at the beginning of the semester, like "when is she going to tell us what she wants us to do in this course--"what she wants us to do" instead of "what do I want to do (interview, 2/12/88).

Several days later, she wrote to me,

Learning should be meaningful. Such a simple statement, but I never realized the full meaning of this until the seminar when I had a hand in what and how I learned (memo, 2/10/88).

#### Generative Questions: Propelling Ourselves into the Future

There is a sense of the future in inquiry. As constant inquirers into the world of teaching and learning, we find that our questions go before us, creating visions of what might be. Even comments which appear negative, such as Kim's below, are clues to valuable and generative social learning experiences.

I'm confused about the curriculum overheads. I think I've completely missed the expectations for the transparency. This is very difficult for me to do (journal entry, 9/11/87).

After seeing several models presented, she wrote,

Seeing the overheads of the teacher's curricula made a world of difference in understanding "the big picture." This is what your day stems from. You plan class time in the way that best meets this "big picture." A visual model of reality is necessary to see this (journal entry, 9/18/87).

Kim's "confusion" was generative. It set her up for learning, for the possibility of gaining new insights.

Another example of the generative nature of questioning was the process Joy and Eric worked through in establishing the authoring cycle. They began with a broad question: Will an authoring cycle framework promote and improve writing in our classroom? Then, How can we start the process in our classroom? These questions led to a semester long research project in their classroom. Each step of implementation caused them to question and reconsider how to proceed. For example, after several weeks, Joy felt that the author's circles were not going very well. She asked me for some suggestions and then began to think through the process as it was being played out in their classroom. She wrote in her journal that week,

Sometimes I think we need to change the format [of the authoring cycle]. I think that maybe we could have idea or brainstorming circles before writing. Then I would definitely try to publish some pieces and display them somewhere in the room [my suggestions] (journal entry, 11/13/87).

She was beginning to question the structure of the authoring cycle as we had used it in the seminar. She felt the need to adapt it to her own setting. Her developing vision of what the authoring cycle could be prepared her to recognize the enactment of that vision in the classroom. As she reported in the last seminar,

One day the kids were having a hard time with writing on a certain subject, so we broke into groups and starting talking about the subject. We brainstormed and then wrote. Then we read and rewrote. It started to work into what we had wanted in the authoring circles all along. The kids were giving ideas and making them into a paper. So with that experience, we came up with the idea that we should start with brainstorming or idea circles earlier in the kids' work. Then maybe they would understand better how others could help them with their work (transcript, seminar twelve, 12/11/87).

Eric' and Joy's questioning expanded to include the children's response to the authoring cycle, pushing their curricular vision further. The visions generated by inquiry became enacted curriculum and new structures move to the fore bringing with them a new round of questions. Joy said in the last seminar,

Throughout the whole semester we asked the kids questions and we tried to get feedback and we used that to change our approach and to see what wasn't clear. We found out what we needed to work on and how to make it better (transcript, seminar twelve, 12/11/8).

They used this dialogue with the children for curriculum change. This conversation between teachers and children required active learning both for the teachers and the students. No one

was allowed the option of observer status in the classroom. Joy recognized and commented on her past observer status and its contrast with her new active role as a learner and teacher.

I always thought that research was something you just read about. Now I know that many good teachers are also researchers in their own classrooms. The research projects gave me a chance to try out an idea first hand and get comfortable with it so that I can feel fairly confident introducing it to my own class. . . I always took the stance of being the observer in my field experiences. I never dreamed of suggesting an activity on my own, at least not one that wasn't required (interview, 2/10/88).

Active inquiry becomes the learning process itself. It is the reflexive role of language which allows us to examine our inquiry, to make connections, and to become instruments for our own and others' learning.

### Language as a Tool for Reflexivity:

#### Creating Artifacts

Whether we are discussing literature in small groups or writing a personal memo in a response log, that making public of our current thinking provides a sounding board and a necessary distance between us and our thoughts.

Why "necessary?" Current research in learning theory tells us that in order to move ahead in our learning, indeed to have a new thought at all, a "stepping back" from written or spoken thinking must occur. This distancing allows the learner the opportunity to create a dialogue with himself and others. Heine (1988)

presents a cogent explication of socio-semiotic learning theory (See Chapter Three) which provides the theoretical argument for the necessity of this "stepping back." He and others have called it "reflexivity."

Heine's (1988) work in explicating a social theory of learning focuses on the creating of artifacts--those public displays of thinking which are shared through various sign systems such as speaking and writing. Another language user may use the artifact to develop his or her own text (internal to the individual) and in turn produce a new artifact. Though this is a most natural learning process, learners with an instructional history consisting largely of a "transmission mode" of teaching and learning need help in circling around, stepping back and seeing themselves as generators of knowledge. Therefore, in this project the curricularizing of reflexivity seemed necessary. This curricularizing took the form of journal writing, interviews and viewing of video tapes.

As data from these sources were analyzed, the value of reflexivity surfaced and a number of categories related to reflexivity emerged: reflexivity allows us to give ourselves and others historical perspective, to make connections, to be publicly metacognitive, to frame and reframe our experience and to become instruments for our own and others' learning.

#### Reflection: Telling our Histories

### Reflection: Telling our Histories

In one paragraph of the "walking journal" (a journal which circulated among all group members for sharing and comment), Eric concisely documented his past year's work in David Heine's (1988) research project and its connection to his current thinking as it was being influenced by the seminar. He also stated his current urgent question: How can I help students to become independent, self-motivated learners?

Lately, the harder I try to improve my curriculum plan, the further I fall behind in the classroom. I seem to be getting caught up with my beliefs, theories, etc., but I can't seem to make the connection in the classroom. Student expectations seem to place learning/ teaching solely on the teacher. I want to place it equally onto both parties. . . . To me, the desire to learn must come from within. It's my responsibility to instill that desire in the students. I try to do this through example--through reading, writing, sharing my love of knowledge . . .but for most students the desire just isn't there. I feel this situation results from prior learning experiences. Enter "family podding" (journal entry, 10/7/87).

Like a reflection in a hall of mirrors, his thinking bounced back and forth from previously created artifacts to a newly public one. In so doing, his thinking became public domain, introducing other seminar members, particularly the preservice teachers who had little history with Eric, to his current concerns.

Committing ourselves to the documentation of our thinking also reveals histories and creates artifacts of which we cannot be aware. Each of us is shaped by numerous thought collectives (Fleck, 1979). Those with whom we share time, space and

meaningful artifacts become inside collaborators in our thinking--"co-laborers" in the business of learning. Those who share alternative collective experiences then stand out as interesting contrasts to our own current thinking. For example, Eric's grandmother responded in a letter to the family story he had written in an authoring cycle experience. Her place in another collective experience became obvious.

Did you get a good grade on your "family story?" I sure would give you an A plus. I just loved it. You have no idea how many times I have read it. . . (letter to Eric, 10/16/87).

Her perception of the appropriate "school-type" evaluation of a written document made us all smile--even the preservice teachers who were still half wondering when I was going to grade something!

#### Reflection: Making Connections

When we begin to verbalize our current best guesses about answers to our questions, we produce spoken or written artifacts which enhance our natural ability to make productive connections in our thinking. In the examples below, the act of public reflection pulled together information for the learner and provided a broader framework for thinking. In the first example, Joy is presenting her classroom research to the larger group. She is explaining how the public sharing of written documents in two different settings was connected and how that connection propelled action. She can now reflect upon and talk about how her actions are different as the result of the connections she

has made, helping the group members to make new connections for themselves.

We did authors circles with those letters. . . . The kids were just like we were, really hesitant to say anything and a little bit nervous about sharing what they had to say. It's funny. If we hadn't done it first and I hadn't seen that we were a little bit nervous about saying anything, I might have been more critical of that. I might have said, "Doesn't anybody have anything to say?" Instead, I said, "Maybe next time you'll feel more comfortable saying these things. It will just take a while." I just thought that was really neat to see that (transcript, seminar three, 9/25/87).

Being reflective about her own learning processes provided Joy with curricular information and a broadened perspective on the learning processes of her children.

Stefanie, in the example below, let the reader in on her process of rethinking her ideas about early literacy. This excerpt is from a written document--a pen pal project summary--in which she makes the connections between early writing experience, the kindergarten curriculum in her inservice teacher's classroom and the content of her pen pal's letters.

I can see many benefits of this project. . . . I found myself looking for strategies that would lead Annie to write more content in her letters. . . . From this project I have found myself wanting to know much more about how children progress to such different writing levels when they are roughly the same age. I do think that the amount of writing experience they have at the early grades plays a major part in these differences. When I look at the written conversations and mailbox messages that are done in the kindergarten classroom, I see how very important these activities are. I have begun to look more closely at them than I did at the beginning of the year (pen pal project report, 12/87).

Stefanie is reorganizing her knowledge and looking for a broader framework for her new experiences with early literacy. Her reflections on her pen pal project led her back in her thinking to view earlier experiences during the semester with new appreciation. This reflection process allowed her to look backward to a previously experienced curriculum and forward to her future curriculum.

The next example of making connections through reflexivity is from Kim's journal. She was writing about the impact of the authoring cycle on her as a learner. The social learning occurring in the authoring cycle provided a context for and opportunity to share personal life events. She commented not only on the power of reflection itself, but also projected her curricular connections into the future.

I originally wrote my story about my uncle's farm. Now it's about an episode in my life. It's scary reflecting that deeply. I'm seeing how much I myself learn from this process and I can imagine its impact on younger learners (journal entry, 10/2/87).

Like Joy in the example above, Kim begins to reflect on her own learning processes and this reflection then takes a curricular turn.

Interview data also contained examples of this making public of connections. Early in the semester, I interviewed Trish about her classroom learning environment. She was explaining the children's work at the learning areas and began reflecting on the role of the teacher in those settings.

In the woodworking corner, the kids were at first just hammering away for the sake of hammering. When we began asking what the things were, they began actually making things and describing them in circle time. It made me think of the article on Lori you gave us. Because the teacher was asking questions about the writing, Lori's writing began to reflect an audience, a reader perspective. The same thing happens in choosing time activities. We structure in sense by our questions (interview, 9/20/89).

Another teacher's written reflection [in the "Lori" article] on her classroom experiences became a connection point and a confirmation of Trish's own classroom experiences.

Making connections allowed for the developing of practical theory. For Stefanie, her reflecting on terms and discussion in the actual seminar class and the curriculum in Trish's kindergarten classroom provided connections which moved her forward in her thinking.

I had never heard the term "whole language" before I came in here and when I went in to Trish's classroom, I wasn't really sure what it meant. I didn't really know. When they [the children] would ask me to spell something, I didn't say sound it out, because I didn't think I could. I had no idea what it involved. . . . Today I learned a lot just from the kids. Plus I learned more about Trish's approach from the way the kids do things and they did sound letters out. I felt a lot better (transcript, seminar five, 10/9/89).

Several connections are being made here. First, she is taking a new concept--whole language--and finding what seems to be manifestation of it in her inservice teacher's classroom. She is also recasting her old view of phonics, or "sounding out" in light of her new developing concept of whole language. Her making public of several connections that day in the seminar encouraged others to also make public their current questions.

Although we, as teacher educators, cannot direct reflexivity, we can provide the encouragement, conditions and time for it. In an in-class reflection period, I asked students to look back at some early documents they had written and reflect on them in light of their current thinking. Kim wrote,

Boy, it's interesting to look back, isn't it? We should have to do it more often. . . . to realize how much information we've taken in. . . I hope I've come a step since this "Where We Are" document. . . . I said I wanted to know how to motivate children in the area of written and oral expression. I think my pre-first experience was helpful in this in some ways . . . I really realized that the skill itself isn't the essential matter, but the feelings and reasoning behind the act of writing (in-class reflection, 10/16/87).

Reflection times help us to make connections with our own thinking. Past recorded thought provides a "jumping off point" for refining current thought. We become critics of our own and other's thinking. Kim valued the opportunities I provided for these reflections.

I understand why you had us observe in the nursery school classroom early in the semester. It was good for me to absorb what we have been learning in class and in turn look at not only this observational experience but at others as well with a more critical eye (midterm reflections, 11/16/87).

The examples above give a sense of how language functioned to help us distance ourselves from our experience and in so doing to use ourselves and others as instruments for our own learning. Our intuitions, best guesses, half-baked ideas and even flashes of brilliance can find definition and refinement in public dialogue.

In summary, language gives us a voice. It helps us to define ourselves in the group, to overcome silence, to articulate our beliefs and therefore, to become empowered. As we find our voices, we begin to create environments by establishing common ground with others and by highlighting our own and others' unique contributions to the learning community. As we begin to distinguish between the common ground and the uniqueness, differences are highlighted. These differences, made public, lead to questions for inquiry. Our questions set us in motion and propel our thinking into the future. Finally, language becomes a tool for reflexivity. Through reflexivity, we gain historical perspective, make connections, frame and reframe our experiences and become instruments for our own and others' learning.

## END NOTES

1. This project was a semester long collaborative seminar in language arts methods for a small group of inservice teachers (seven) and preservice teachers (eight), a school principal and a university instructor. We met every Friday afternoon for a 2 1/2 hours working with the authoring cycle, classroom research projects and literature circles (see Appendix A). The focus was on teaching as inquiry or research for the practitioner (see Appendix B). The curricular structures of the course were also the data collection points.

The purpose of the study was to explore and describe the context and negotiated curriculum of a language arts methods class in elementary education. Further, the study attempted to trace the theoretical development of the thinking of preservice teachers in regard to the teaching and learning of the language arts. Finally, the study focused on the power of the relationships which developed between preservice and inservice teachers as they became research partners in the classroom.

2. "Nightmares in my Closet" was an initial curriculum invitation to the group to jot down current fears and questions about teaching and curriculum. This activity actually became a series of orienting questions which propelled individual learning during the semester. (See Appendix C for a partial list of those "nightmares.")

## REFERENCES

Watson, D., Harste, J., & Burke, C. (in press) Whole language: Inquiring voices. Portsmouth: NH: Heinemann.

## Appendix A. Course Syllabus.

E339

Syllabus

**Research Seminar**

Fall, 1987

Sharon Andrews (O) 335-7167 (H) 339-4464

Terry McDaniel (O) 829-2253

**Time:** Fridays, 12:15 - 3pm

**Location:** Spencer Elementary School

**Course Title:** Methods of Teaching Elementary Language  
Arts

### **COURSE INTENT:**

E339 is part of a cluster of methods courses for preservice teachers. The other courses are E340 (Reading Methods) and E311 (General Issues). Theoretically and practically "Language Arts" and "Reading" are not separate content areas with separate skills to be mastered in theory and applied in practice. Reading is one of the "language arts" and much of what we will do as students of "language arts" methods will seem to overlap with "reading methods." For the sake of order and to comply with mandated course divisions, the instructors have divided course topics which overlap, though some redundancy remains.

Those of you who have joined this E339 research seminar have by now realized some of the intent of this particular section of E339. To reiterate course intents, this seminar will provide a forum in which we can:

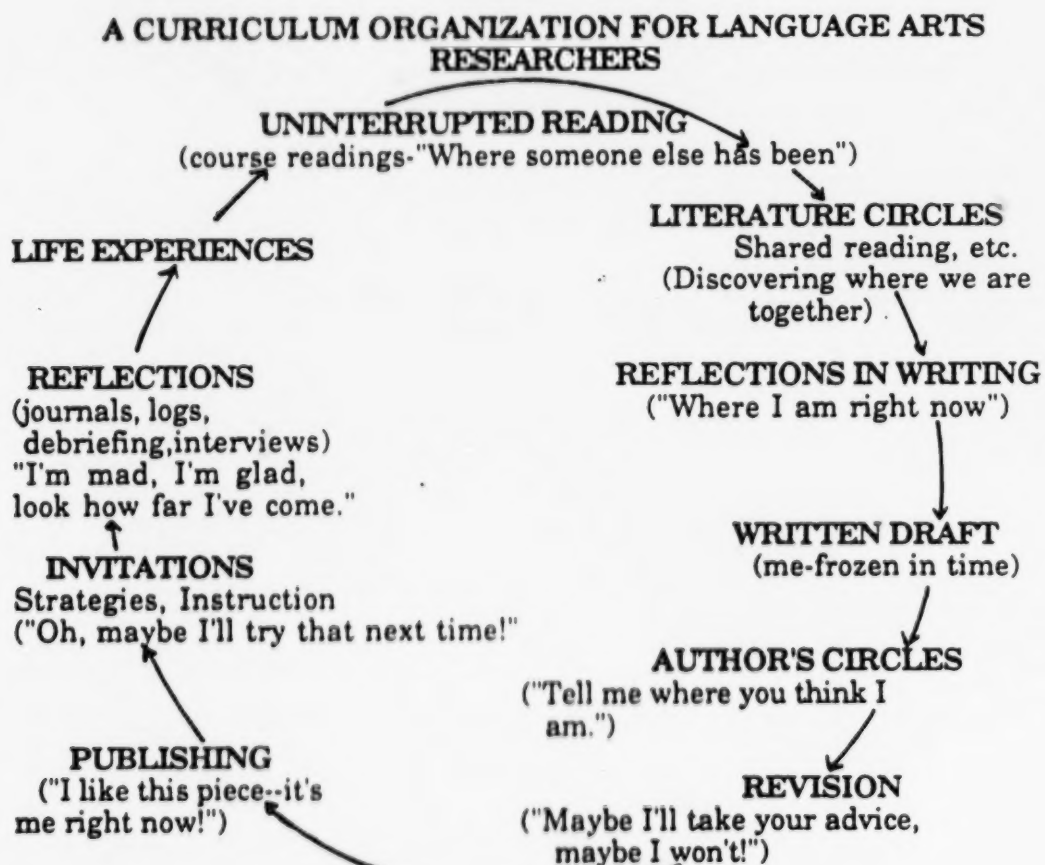
1. investigate, discuss, and respond to current language arts teaching and materials in the field.
2. develop as decision-makers on the basis of our reading, writing, and researching in language teaching and learning through the curricular framework of the authoring cycle.
3. collaborate on one or two aspects of ours' or someone else's current language arts curriculum which we wish to develop, investigate, or improve.

### **TEXTS**

Newman, J. (1986) Whole language. Portsmouth,  
NH: Heinemann.

Graves, D., Hansen, J. and Newkirk, T. (1984). Breaking Ground: Teachers Relate Reading and Writing in the Classroom. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

These texts are written, for the most part, by classroom teachers who have tried to make changes, become teacher/researchers, and develop as decision-makers. We won't necessarily agree with everything they say. That's OKAY! What we will see is a collection of written artifacts which provide us with some teachers' thoughtful looks at what they are trying to do in the classroom--demonstrations of how their thinking and practice have changed. For teachers who do not want to buy the texts, some extras will be available to borrow.



(S. Andrews, 1987, adapted from C. Burke, 1987)

The authoring cycle as presented above provides a curricular

framework which supports critical thinking, decision-making and the development of theoretical stance through collaboration. It also provides a curriculum organization against which we can compare other types of curricular organization for the language arts. The cycle above may appear to be linear, however the context of the class meeting and the type of engagements will determine the actual areas of the cycle we focus on.

### **TENTATIVE SEMINAR SCHEDULE**

12:15 - Sharing--new books, quotes, experiences, etc.

1:30 - 1:00 - literature circles

1:00 - 2:00 - demonstrations/instruction  
reflections

2:00 - 2:40 - strategies/invitations/author's circles

2:40 - 3:00 - reflections

post 3:00 - library checkout, conferences, etc.

### **PROJECTS**

Handouts and discussion of projects will follow in early class sessions.

1. Develop a personal "3R's Notebook"--Resources, Research, and Reflections. Outline for possible organization of the notebooks will be handed out in class.
2. Collaborate on action research projects. Preservice and inservice teachers will co-author an article based on their research.
3. Pen pal projects - weekly letter exchange with second graders and one page summary at end of course (handout/discussion later in semester).
4. Participate in dialogue journals between preservice and inservice teachers.

5. Participate in walking journals.
6. For undergrads: "Reflections on Pre-school Observations" paper.
7. Develop one strategy in the language arts and use it in your field experience classroom--handout and explanation will follow later in the semester.

#### **GRADING (for those taking the course for credit)**

Preservice teachers will receive grades based on attendance and participation and final documents. From the instructors' point of view, grades will not be emphasized. We are interested in the personal growth of the students based on their needs and interests at this time. However, because this is a university course as well as a research project, grades will be given to the undergraduates and any teachers taking the seminar for Masters' credit. Grades will be given only on final documents. The guidelines for final documents will be handed later in the semester and should NOT be referred to for early drafts. Use of editor's circles and in and out-of-class conference times with the instructors is encouraged prior to submission of final drafts. You may do one re-write per final draft within a week's time of receiving your graded paper.

#### **ATTENDANCE POLICY**

In two words: be here. The rationale is fairly simple. If you aren't here, we can't learn from you and you can't learn from us. Every person involved in this seminar has unique experience to offer and unique responses to the readings and activities which comprise this curriculum. We need each other! Be here!

#### **PARTICIPATION**

In order for literature circles and and discussion groups to function in relationship to other areas of the curriculum, it is important that readings and associated activities be done prior to class meetings. When author's and editor's circles are available, it's important that you have a working draft ready to share in order to benefit from the curriculum cycle we have set up.

Appendix B. Calendar of Major Seminar Events and Engagements.

| Seminar Events/Engagements               |                                                                                                                                   |            |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Journals                                 | Taping                                                                                                                            | Interviews |
| Week 1<br>9/11/87                        | Getting to know you.<br>Authoring cycle: Experience #1.<br>"Nightmares"                                                           |            |
| Journal reflections<br>Week 2<br>9/18/87 | Curriculum overheads.                                                                                                             | Debriefing |
| Sharing time.<br>Author's circles.       | "Best teacher/worst teacher."<br>Curriculum overheads.                                                                            | Debriefing |
| Week 3<br>9/25/87                        | Literature groups.<br>Curriculum models.                                                                                          | Debriefing |
| Week 4<br>10/2/87                        | Literature groups.<br>Curriculum models.                                                                                          | Debriefing |
| Pivotal seminar<br>Week 5<br>10/9/87     | Discuss field trips.<br>Large groups discussion: W. L. and phonics.<br>Standardized testing discussion.                           | Interviews |
| Week 6<br>10/16/87                       | Whole group generation of topics/responsibilities for remaining sessions.<br>Strategy workshop.                                   | Debriefing |
| Week 7<br>10/23/87                       | Authoring cycle: Experience #2. Predictable Books<br>Discuss penpal projects.<br>Basal Reader presentation.                       | Debriefing |
| Week 8<br>11/6/87                        | "People's Choice": One-on-one chats.<br>Research groups. Author's circles.<br>Presentation: Denise Ogren                          | Debriefing |
| Week 9<br>11/13/87                       | "People's Choice": One-on-one chats.<br>Research groups. Author's circles.<br>Human Development Activity                          | Debriefing |
| Week 10<br>11/20/87                      | "People's Choice": One-on-one chats.<br>Literature circles. Author's circles.<br>Research groups.<br>Holistic scoring of writing. | Debriefing |
| Week 11<br>12/4/87                       | "People's Choice": One-on-one chats.<br>Author's circles. Research groups.<br>Editing groups.                                     | Debriefing |
| Week 12<br>12/11/87                      | Mock job interviews.<br>Large group presentation of research projects.                                                            | Interviews |

**Preservice Teachers' "Nightmares"**

1. Fear of not getting a job (Stephanie).
2. Fear of failure, of not living up to expectations (Stephanie).
3. Fear of negatively influencing child's attitude about school (Joy).
4. Fear of lack of preparation for teaching (Gina).
5. Fear of not getting "the big picture" for all this information about teaching (Kim).
6. Fear of not feeling the freedom to ask questions (Kim).
7. Fear of not having control in the classroom (Joy).
8. Fear of limits and restrictions on my teaching by the school principal (Joy).

**Inservice Teachers' "Nightmares"**

1. Fear of what other teachers think about my teaching.
2. Fear of turning children off toward school.
3. Fear of not being accepted by other teachers if I do something different.
4. Fear of comparison to other teachers at my grade level.
5. Fear of state tests dictating my curriculum.

**Principal's "Nightmares"**

1. Fear of children not learning if I let teachers do what they want in their classrooms.
2. Fear of the internship program.

**Instructor's "Nightmares"**

1. Fear of not covering all the materials which the preservice teachers need in a one semester course.
2. Fear of state testing controlling curriculum at all levels.